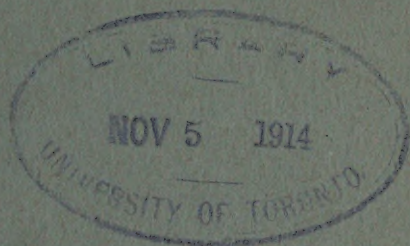


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The Independent Woman



An Address
Before the Alabama Girls' Technical Institute
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By
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III
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THE INDEPENDENT WOMAN

I understand that, while not all of the students of this school enter upon careers of self-support, its courses are designed to prepare a young woman to make her own way in the world, and I shall, therefore, venture to talk to you briefly on "The Independent Woman" with some reference to her place in the development of Alabama and the South.

My faith in the South and in the ultimate destiny of the Southern people is such that I look upon the present crisis brought about by the depression of the cotton market as a result of the war in Europe as a minor thing compared with the difficulties which the Southern people have already met and overcome. It is being met with the courage and energy which have always characterized the South in times of stress and trial. It will be attended by much discomfort and some real distress calling for a renewed display of the Southern spirit of self-help. It will delay only temporarily the onward march of Southern progress.

When this inevitable progress has been resumed it may be expected that the fuller development of the waste lands and latent resources of our section will bring about new conditions in our social organization and open up wider and more varied opportunities. Southern young men and young women of today should be prepared to meet these conditions, to embrace these opportunities, and to take their places in the broader life of the South. While I am a strong advocate for the largest opportunity to women in the highest branches of cultural education, we must recognize that it is in schools such as this, which recognize the necessity for industrial education for women, that, under existing educational conditions in the South, our young women are most likely to obtain the training and acquire the viewpoint that will enable them to enter into the spirit of the expanding industrial life of the South even if they do not, as independent and self-supporting women, take part in it.

Relatively a few years ago such an institution as the Alabama Girls' Technical Institute would have been impracticable. There were many so-called finishing schools for girls and here and there a young woman, at the risk of being referred to slightlyingly as a *bas bleu*, managed to acquire a broad and solid education. It was generally considered, how-

ever, that higher education and special training were privileges of men alone and that their sisters should be content with a common-school, or at most a high-school, course, overlaid with a thin veneer of polite accomplishments. In those times a school designed to equip women for self-support and independence could not have existed for the very good reason that its graduates could have made little practical use of their training.

This condition has been radically changed, and, in the South, as elsewhere, we are living in a day of broadening opportunity for women. It has always been the privilege of woman to work, but in former times her activities were generally confined to household duties, the care of children, and employment in certain lines of manual labor.

Sir Anthony Fitzherbert, writing in the sixteenth century, pictures the duties of the English farmer's wife of that day as follows:

"It is a wyues occupation to wynowe all maner of cornes, to make malte, to waßshe and wrynge, to make heye, shere corne, and in tyme of nede to helpe her husbande to fyll the mucke-wayne or dongue-carte, dryue the ploughe, to loode hey, corne and suche other. And to go or ride to the market, to sel butter, chese, mylke, egges, chekyns, capons, hennes, pygges, gese, and all maner of cornes. And also to bye all maner of necessarye thynges belongynge to the houssholde, and to make a trewe rekenynge and acompte to her husbande what she hath payed."

Sir Anthony does not tell us how the lady would spend her spare time.

In early times it was only the woman called to high station by birth who had a wider field, who could demonstrate a capacity for even the most responsible and difficult work, who could lead armies against the power of Rome, as Zenobia of Palmyra, or rule great nations, as Elizabeth of England or Catherine of Russia.

While there were exceptions, here and there, the woman under the necessity of supporting herself generally found only domestic service or some other form of manual labor open to her. The broadening of the field began with the advent of the woman school teacher. Now all the bars are down. In almost all lines of human endeavor women are working side by side with men.

There are those who deplore this change: who talk about the sphere

of woman being in the home. So it is, and so it always will be, for the great majority of women. But limiting the sphere of woman to the home presupposes that each woman shall have a home and that the home shall be maintained. Unfortunately, this ideal arrangement can not be brought about for all women. There will always be the woman without a man as a bread-winner or a private income of her own. Under old conditions, if she was not to become a public charge, almost her only refuge was in domestic service. Now, if she has qualified herself, she may choose her career and her progress will be dependent largely upon her ability and industry.

I should not be understood as decrying the training of woman for the home. On the contrary, I believe that should be an indispensable feature of the education of every girl, and I am glad to know that it is an important part of the curriculum of this school. Every woman, whatever her station in life, should be a trained housekeeper. Even though she may do little or none of the work with her own hands, she should know how everything ought to be done, not only in the kitchen, but in the whole house, from cellar to garret, and should understand the care of children and the principles of household sanitation and hygienic living.

With domestic science as a basis, the further education of a young woman should depend upon her individual circumstances. The college or university and the fashionable finishing school have their proper places, but there is a broad field of usefulness for a school such as this, with courses designed to fit the girl to be a bread-winner. I may even go so far as to say that, in addition to being a trained housekeeper, every woman, whether she expects to have to support herself or not, should have such an education as will enable her to do so if the necessity shall arise. She will face life with much more confidence and will not be entirely helpless if the death of a man bread-winner in after years shall leave her penniless or with inadequate resources and possibly with a family of children.

The broadening of the opportunity for woman has largely been made possible by a changed attitude of the public mind toward the woman who works. Time was when the average girl whose parents could support her would not have thought of acquiring an industrial training, and if she had done so her father would have thought that it carried an implication that he could not provide for her. Now, all this has been changed.

The working woman is held in honor and esteem; girls who are under no immediate necessity for working for a living are fitting themselves for business careers and their parents are wisely encouraging them to do so.

The self-supporting young woman is by no means debarred from matrimony. I suspect that most of the students of this school, like all other normal-minded girls, are looking forward to marriage when the right man presents himself, and the girl who has the qualities that lead her to take up a career of self-support usually has no lack of suitors. She has, moreover, important advantages in this momentous matter of selecting a life companion. Her work brings her into contact with men; she sees them under very different conditions from the girl who only meets them socially; she becomes a judge of character, and she is not under the necessity, for bread and butter reasons, of taking the first who may offer. And when she has married and become a home-maker, she finds that household management is essentially business management, and her training in the practical affairs of life comes into play. She has learned the value of money and what it means to earn a dollar, and if her husband's resources are slender she can make his money go farther than a woman who has always had money given her. Last, but not least, she is able to enter into the spirit of her husband's work, to understand something of his problems, and to be a real help-mate in times of perplexity and trial.

Thus, as we look forward into the coming years, we see the graduates of the Alabama Girls' Technical Institute taking their places in the broader life which is certainly opening before the South—some of them as independent working women, some of them carrying into homes the training and the viewpoint they have here acquired, but each of them adorning the station to which she may be called.

